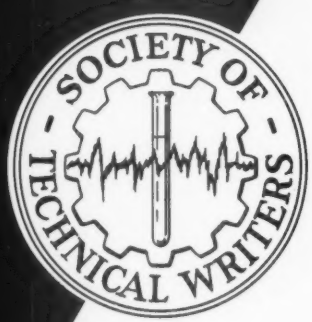
TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW



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TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW

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The Functions of a Technical Writer in Industry **P. D. Patterson** 2

Mr. Patterson, who writes out of his experience with technical writing in England, served his government during the War in investigating the enemy rubber potential throughout the world. He is associated with the Dunlop Research Centre where he organized the Service of Technical Writing. He is the founder of the London Presentation of Technical Information Group and is an associate member of the Association of British Science Writers.

The Instructor Role of Technical Writers **Hilary H. Milton** 7

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Professional, Artisan, Something Else? **Floyd Hickok** 10

Laboratory for Electronics, Inc., Boston

Candidates for National Office . . . . . Inside back cover

STW District Map . . . . . Outside back cover

FUTURE ISSUES

Contributions to future issues of Technical Writing Review are invited. Suggested subjects – the list should be used mainly as a source of leading ideas – are as follows:

--Cost factors involved in publishing technical literature.

--Diversification versus specialization in technical writers.

--Uses and abuses of the comma.

--The outsider's point of view.

--New methods in the preparation of technical literature.

--Can format ever be violated?

--Book reviews.

--How do you handle illustrations?

REPORT

from the PRESIDENT

STW Has Had a Good Year

ORGANIZATION

Now that organization as a national professional society, with graded membership, is complete, we are free to apply our energies directly to our basic program: developing the profession.

As I write we have 460 members drawn from most of the states in the United States and from three other countries. A week does not pass without additional members coming in.

COOPERATION

We are cooperating with other groups interested in technical writing, and we hope that in the interests of the profession the several groups can be brought together into one effective organization.

THE REVIEW

In the TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW we have the beginnings of a substantial professional journal. It may prove feasible to secure foundation assistance for the REVIEW for a year or two until it is firmly established.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

We are readying an eighteen-month research project to examine the problems of recruitment and training of Technical Writers. We have also made preliminary contact with one university with a view to sponsoring symposia for leaders in the field, evening classes for practicing technical writers and summer school courses to prepare advanced undergraduates or recent graduates to begin as Technical Writers.

NEXT YEAR

In the coming year I urge you to:

1. Encourage your colleagues to apply for membership in STW.
2. Apply, yourself, for suitable advancement in grade so that you will be available to serve the Society in elective office.
3. Take the initiative in establishing a Chapter in your area.
4. Submit articles or drafts of articles for the REVIEW, or suggest the names of individuals from whom we should solicit articles.
5. Attend the symposium we plan to hold in the Fall. Dates and place will be announced.
6. Write in, early in the Summer, your suggestions for the Society's, and the REVIEW's, program for the coming year. And do not penalize the Society by being modest about ways in which you yourself can help!

Paul H. Flint

Paul H. Flint

MANAGEMENT QUERY: How shall technical writers be chosen?

STW has been asked by several representatives of management to indicate what qualifications they should look for in technical writers. It is interesting to note and compare the similarities of opinion in the USA and in England as shown by this article.

The FUNCTIONS OF A TECHNICAL WRITER IN INDUSTRY

P. D. Patterson

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that much has been written and discussed about the art (or is it science?) of technical writing, there is one most important side which seems to have been strangely neglected.

Let us assume that we are in the position of an industrial organisation which has been persuaded that they should employ the services of a Technical Writer. Let us go further, and assume that we have been lucky enough to get the right kind of man, who has books by Professor Kapp, Sir Ernest Gowers, Dr. Flesch, Mr. Williams and others at his bedside, above all perhaps, a man who never misses a meeting of the PTI Groups in London and Birmingham. Having got this paragon, have we ever thought how we are going to use him? There are probably quite a number of cases where organisations who have become sufficiently conscious of the evolution of this new class of specialist to employ one, may not be getting their full money's worth, because he is not being used in the most efficient way. If this aspect is given serious consideration, there is little doubt that the value of a Technical Writer to industry can be increased many times.

How a Specialist Technical Writer can be of Use to Industry

This is the point we must first consider. Many people will be surprised at the number of ways in which the services of a Technical Writer can be of value. The principal ways are outlined below, but it should be realised that they are only broad headings, each one can be subdivided many times. It is probably also advisable to point out that the question of under what headings the Technical Writer is going to operate, will depend upon individual circumstances. It will presently be seen that a single Technical Writer could not cover all of them in person; he could, however, direct the activities of one or two assistants, so that he could accept responsibility over the whole range.

Guidance of Non-Technical Staff

The volume of information provided by the industrial scientist is steadily growing, year by year. There is a risk that a fair proportion of this information may be wasted, unless its significance can be brought to the notice of those in a position to take the action needed to seize suitable opportunities. This applies to executives in the fields of production, distribution, purchasing, product performance, and so on.

For this function a Technical Writer needs rather more than the necessary ability in presentation; he must in addition have had some experience of his company's activities over a fairly broad field; he must also have sufficient standing to keep himself up-to-date in the general trends, by frequent contact with the appropriate departments. If, in addition, he has a capacity for discrimination, he might be able to function as a kind of "technical assessor" for management. In doing this he might well inspire opposing technical interests to clear their thoughts and present an agreed view; it is sometimes necessary to spend quite a lot of time on this essential preliminary to the collecting of technical information.

Preparation of Technical Reports

A Technical Writer should be able to advise upon (or even direct) the presentation of technical reports, so that the information they contain is readily assimilated

by technical staff. It does not seem appropriate that he should himself write them, although there is a school of thought in the USA which favours this activity, which goes under the name of "ghost writing".

Preparation of Service Literature

This is probably the most well-known use for a Technical Writer. It presents few, if any, problems, since the starting material is usually well-documented and a competent writer should have no difficulty in presenting it to different classes of users.

Factory Relations

It is beginning to be appreciated that there is a lot to be gained by giving attention to ways and means of increasing the "understanding" of staff and operatives within an industrial organisation. If they can be made to appreciate the reasons underlying company policy, process instructions, personnel changes and so on, internal "company goodwill" can be considerably increased. The Technical Writer is only one among many who can help in this direction. One way in which he can be used for this kind of work, is to prepare a series of articles for house magazines built round departments in turn, well illustrated by photographs and aiming to explain the "why and the wherefore" about manufacturing processes in a readable fashion.

Advertising

At first thought, it might be supposed that a Technical Writer will have little to do with paid advertisement. However, there is an increasing tendency to base advertising on technical points, so that there must be someone in a position to act as "liaison officer" between technical and advertising staff. In this capacity a Technical Writer, if he has the right approach, can check copy and also suggest technical items that might feature in future advertising.

Motion Pictures and Radio

This method is being increasingly used both for internal and Public Relations work and technical material can often be employed with good effect. The advent of Commercial Television will probably increase the demand for motion picture work still further. In both cases the Technical Writer is probably the most appropriate person to act as a "liaison officer" between the technical and motion picture or radio interest.

Public Relations

The very considerable amount of goodwill (followed naturally by sales "acceptance") which can be secured at small expense by publicising technical progress in a suitable fashion, is becoming more widely recognised. This is a field where a Technical Writer with suitable qualifications, can be of very great help. There are a number of ways in which this can be done, which are referred to later, under the heading "Methods of Interpretation". At this point it is intended merely to draw attention to one or two basic requirements which the Technical Writer must meet, if his services are to be of value to the public relations organisation.

(a) He must first of all clearly establish the "objective" in telling the public about any particular development. It is surprising how often this essential point seems to be overlooked.

(b) He must also make sure that his factual matter is accurate and (equally important) that his interpretation of it will be fully supported by the technical organisation;- he must also be certain it is in line with general company policy. Furthermore, in self defence he would be well-advised to keep a record of those who have given approval in these directions.

(c) He must present the facts with a due sense of "balance", both in relation to company affairs and the world outside. A man who can present material reasonably well, sometimes lacks an ability to discriminate.

(d) He must make the story understandable to the chosen audience and ensure that the "message" visualized when the "objective" is assessed, is clearly put over.

(e) If the story is being put over to the public through some outside agency, e.g. press or radio, the material

must in the first place, be presented so as to attract favourable attention from editors or programme directors.

Appropriate position of a Technical Writer in Industry

Having established the uses for a Service of Technical Writing, we come to the very important question of how he is to be fitted into the existing organisation. There can of course, be no general principle here; so much depends upon individual circumstances, which are of an infinite variety according to the organisations concerned. There are, however, several broad alternatives worthy of consideration and these can be reviewed briefly.

The first thing we shall need to establish is whether to appoint a specialist Technical Writer with a full-time assignment, or whether to delegate this work as the part-time responsibility of existing staff (either on a collective or an individual basis). A full-time Technical Writer is naturally much to be preferred. With a small organisation however, the latter method may well be more appropriate, but has difficulties, both from the viewpoint of securing an adequate flow of suitable material and maintaining the necessary degree of control. With large organisations, where the possibilities of using a Technical Writer extend beyond the capacity of any one individual, he can be provided with carefully chosen assistants (probably for him to train). Another possibility is to appoint a separate Technical Writer for each company interest, making each one responsible to a "Chief Technical Writer" in a central location. This individual might function in a similar manner to the "Chief Training Officer" or the "Chief Personnel Officer" in a big organisation.

When a specialist Technical Writer is appointed, it is most necessary to consider very carefully where he shall be fitted into the existing organisation. Broadly speaking, there are three possibilities, each of which have certain advantages:

(a) Attachment to Technical organisation This has the obvious advantage of ensuring a close link with research and development and making equally sure that the Technical Writer is "persona grata" with the technical side. There is a further important advantage in stationing the Technical Writer on this side of the organisation, which is particularly significant in public relations work. Material for outside publication naturally needs to have a discreet company "link" if it is to be worthwhile, and this can be conveniently done by quoting the author's name and company. Where the material has a technical background, it carries much greater weight if the author can be accredited to the technical side, since it is assumed that he has some personal knowledge of the subject about which he is writing.

(b) Attachment to Sales organisation The principal advantage of linking a Technical Writer with this side of the organisation is that it keeps him in close touch with the commercial background and will help him to "sense" the advantages of publicising particular developments, according to the need of the moment.

(c) Attachment to Public Relations organisation If this is done, the chief advantage would be that the Technical Writer would probably have at his disposal useful facilities for external contacts and might even be in a more favourable position with regard to securing any special facilities he considers necessary.

Whichever of these locations is selected, it is of great importance that the Technical Writer should have the confidence of each interest. Not only must he be kept in close touch with developments in each broad field, but he must seek to establish himself so that all sides of the organisation feel that they can rely on him to safeguard their interests. This will be helped if the individual concerned has had a certain amount of experience in each field, should this be possible.

Another important consideration is that, whatever arrangements are made, the duties of the Technical Writer should be clearly defined and accepted at the various levels. In this connection what might be called the "chain-of-command" is significant. To be accepted at different levels and on different sides, it is helpful if the Technical Writer can be made directly responsible to some high level

executive; it might even be appropriate to make him responsible to some small group of people, who themselves represent a wide variety of interests.

There are three distinct stages in most technical writing assignments, collecting the basic material, presenting it, and checking for technical accuracy and policy. In my experience it is the first and the last that consume by far the most time, and the higher the standing of the Technical Writer, the shorter this time will be. One way of providing basic material is to supply copies of the minutes of all meetings which deal with technical and allied matters. There is, however, nothing so good as direct contact for getting the real background feeling, which written material may never provide.

Basic Methods of Presenting Technical Information

Presentation by the written word is, of course, the one used in the majority of cases, and I do not propose to discuss the angle, since this has been done by many people better qualified than myself. However, it must not be overlooked that there are several other methods, each useful for presenting technical information for certain purposes. Direct speaking should not be neglected, either in the form of lectures, or in more informal conversation with, say, groups of visitors or at Press Conferences.

It is not always appreciated that a Technical Writer can give useful help in the preparation of displays intended for advertising, in suggesting ideas and checking the technical relevance of advertising copy itself, and in advising the film producer where technical matters are concerned. It should perhaps be emphasised that with these last few instances, the advertising man or film producer, by reason of his own expert knowledge, should of course have the overall responsibility, but the Technical Writer can play a very useful part as adviser, and may even be in a position to suggest ideas for the expert to work on.

The application of sound radio and television to the dissemination of technical information, is likely to become more significant in the future with the advent of Commercial Television. The non-commercial nature of the existing BBC programmes in both sound and television, has necessarily prevented industry from taking any initiative with regard to the material presented. Nevertheless there have been many occasions when the BBC have asked for facilities to put over an industrial subject, and experience has shown that a Technical Writer is a very appropriate person to act as a liaison officer, with mutual benefit to both parties. The experience so gained should prove useful with Commercial Television, in view of the undoubted scope this provides for using technical material as an instrument of public relations.

Staff Selection for Technical Writing

Because of the comparatively recent evolution of this new class of specialist, there are no such well-established standards to guide staff selection as there are with nearly every other type of specialist. Certain tentative moves have been made with regard to a possible basis for assessing proficiency, but preliminary investigation shows that there are many difficulties, so that no early solution of this problem can be expected.

However, for [illegible]ey are worth, I will give a note [illegible] qualities I would look for in selecting candidates for a technical writing vacancy. The order of arrangement is that those qualities to which I attach greatest importance are placed first, but this order would not, of course, necessarily be adopted by everyone.

1. Ability to think clearly, with a sound sense of balance and the power to discriminate, both in relation to technical matters and the world outside.
2. Ability to express ideas clearly in writing, at more than one level according to circumstances.
3. Possession of a pleasing personality and an ability to use the spoken word. With this should go a persistent, but friendly, nature. A Technical Writer must never despair, but must not press so hard as to antagonise his internal contacts. In this connection it is sometimes overlooked that perhaps forty or fifty per cent of a Technical Writer's time will be taken up with the collection of information, often through the agency of personal discussion.

4. An adequate technical background is, of course, a fairly obvious requirement, but it need not be too detailed. From some angles, too much technical knowledge in any one part of the field may be a handicap to presenting a balanced view.

5. The desirability that previous experience should have been in as broad a field as possible. To some extent a Technical Writer should be a "man of the world".

6. Sufficient skill with the English language to ensure a good style together with the avoidance of obvious grammatical and spelling errors. An extensive vocabulary would be an asset.

7. If duties involve staff supervision, some executive ability would be desirable.

It is naturally unwise to rely entirely on the normal methods of personnel selection, to assess the possibility of candidates, although these will certainly be of value in guiding the choice. It is suggested that before any final decision is taken, candidates should prepare a suitable piece of "test writing". This might be compiled from a file relating to some piece of writing already prepared, preferably one based entirely on documentary material.

Copies of this material could be provided, together with a briefing as to the object of presenting the material to a specified audience and the length of the final draft; other features could be left entirely to the candidates discretion. The result could then be compared with the version already available and perhaps discussed with the candidate.

Future Status of Technical Writers

This is being seriously considered by several bodies and the London PTI Group are playing an important part in the studies which are in hand. It is not proposed to review the different considerations under this heading, but I would like to put forward some views, prompted by my own experience and discussions with other people interested in the subject.

The description "Technical Writer" seems to be becoming generally accepted as defining the specialist whose functions have been reviewed. I am, however, not entirely happy about its suitability. In the sense in which it appears to be finding acceptance, it seems to indicate a person with the ability to prepare, from specially selected technical documents, a service instruction or booklet. As will have been gathered from earlier remarks, this is only one of the many things a technical writer should be able to do, and not necessarily the most important, although probably the easiest.

Another danger arises, if this definition becomes generally accepted. This is that no Technical Writer will be considered to possess any personal knowledge of the subject about which he is writing, which (unless the material is anonymous) will detract from its editorial acceptance. If anonymous, then the public relations value of the "company link" will be missing. This, of course, is only a handicap in the public relations field, and where technical information is never to be disseminated externally, or where it is to be used for "service" publications, is unimportant.

On the other hand if a Technical Writer never establishes his function when material is published editorially, he and his colleagues who supply him with information may be embarrassed when he is accepted as an expert on a subject where he is only an interpreter.

It may very well be that the possibilities reviewed for making the greatest use of Technical Writers in Industry are asking too much from such a specialist. It might even be appropriate to invent another name for such a person, should he exist.

There are moves on foot to try and raise the status of Technical Writers. Perhaps the fact that such moves are necessary arise from there being too narrow a definition of the functions of such a specialist; it might well be that if he were to aim to serve in the wider field which has been outlined, such moves would be less urgent. During a discussion on this subject at the Birmingham PTI Group, a technical editor gave it as his opinion that the Technical Writer should be on the same level as the Sales Manager, Advertising Manager or Chief Engineer. This might very well be true, but if so we should probably have to find him another name.

(Continued on page 12)

The INSTRUCTOR ROLE of Technical Writers

Hilary H. Milton

DID you ever realize that the Technical Writer teaches? It's true. A technical author is also an instructor. Any time a Technical Writer sits down at his desk and prepares the manuscript on a technical subject for a training manual, he becomes a teacher for those people who will read the publication. On paper he must put all of the instructions which will take a person from the unknown into the known without the benefit of classroom instruction.

Of course, this is true with manuals rather than with technical reports or catalogues. Such reports and catalogues are informative rather than instructive. But by and large, the many technical manuals produced today go to readers who will try to learn from those publications techniques of maintenance, operation, and use. These readers are expecting from the publication the guidance they might ordinarily get in class courses or in laboratory demonstrations.

Manuals differ in many respects from technical reports and catalogues. They must give specific instructions as well as general principles; it is not enough for manuals to list a series of parts and in abbreviated fashion explain what one does and how it fits into the equipment.

These manuals must be longer, more inclusive, and more motivational than the reports and the catalogues which Technical Writers prepare.

In my experience during the past few years with training manuals which are technical, I have often found that the engineers who are the authors neglect to consider anything beyond the writing itself. It is as if they say, "My job is to write. It is your job (readers) to gain from my experience the knowledge you must have. It is all here for now, you dig it out." I know, and you will realize it too if you only think of it awhile, that such an attitude is not helpful.

Those of us who prepare technical manuals which teach techniques must keep before us the thought that we are teaching. It is our responsibility to convey the information in such a fashion that our readers get the techniques and guidance as quickly and as clearly as possible. In other words, we must develop a writing style that will vividly portray the information; and we must make the illustrations good visual aids to supplement the text. In this short article it is not possible to cover all aspects of the writing style and all aspects of the illustrative devices as they pertain to technical manuals. But in a few paragraphs, suppose we examine general techniques which will improve the instructional aspect of technical manuals.

DEVELOP A WRITING STYLE THAT INSTRUCTS

Any publication or any piece of sustained writing depends on a writing style to carry the reader along so that he gets the ideas which the writer offers him. It is not sufficient merely to put words to ideas; frequently words can express ideas but in such a way that the reader has difficulty grasping them. A technical manual should not create a stumbling block for those people who must get from it the technical "know-how" essential to doing a particular job. Any such style that disturbs the reader to the point that he does not get full understanding of the text is not satisfactory.

A style of writing which appeals to the reader and informs him directly has certain elements in it which make it useful for technical manuals. Some of these

elements are a personal approach, a simple presentation, specific applications of general statements, and introductory and terminal devices. It is not possible to expand all of these elaborately, but suppose we treat them in a brief way here.

When a teacher talks to his class, he does not remove himself from them and treat them impersonally. Rather, if he is good, he talks directly to them. He does not refer to himself as "the instructor" or to the people in his class as "the students". He talks as if he and the students were conversing informally. He says we, you, and us in a way which will make the group a unit. The Technical Writer who wishes to have his readers understand his material will use the same technique. When he is explaining a particular principle he may use the first person plural, the second person, and any references which will relate himself and the group in a common purpose. He may say, "Now, suppose we consider the. . ." Such an approach leads to better and more effective understanding on the part of the readers. Very likely you have read many pieces which had in them these personal pronouns; you noticed that you became a part of the specific audience. But if you will look at some technical manuals which have the impersonal treatment, you will consider in some cases that the writer did not have his readers in mind. He was putting facts on paper, and it seemed unnecessary to him to bring his readers into the picture.

While you are presenting facts you are also conveying knowledge from yourself to a given audience. You are not putting words on paper as an end in itself. A publication is not prepared simply to record facts. No technical manual prepared today has history as its primary purpose. So if you expect readers to follow the style of writing you use and to understand the ideas you wish to convey, you will make the job easier for them and for yourself if you use the personal approach.

The simpler you make your writing, the better the readers will understand it. That means you should not use an abundance of vague terms, long and involved sentence structure, numerous phrases and clauses as modifiers, passive sentence structures, and abstract expressions. Of course, if you are treating a technical subject, you cannot avoid using certain technical terms. But technical terms usually have a concrete application. They are transferred from unknown to known without too much difficulty.

But abstract words – non-technical – cause stumbling blocks to the readers. Also, long sentences that ramble on and on and on are discouraging to most readers.

So what is the best guidance regarding your writing style? Keep sentences relatively short, in the neighborhood of eighteen to twenty-five words. Use fewer multi-syllable words. Avoid passive constructions when you can put action and force into a sentence. Don't use an abundance of adjectives and adverbs, and keep your sentences smooth and easy to follow.

Then, in your writing, try to give specific applications to general principles. You know that a classroom instructor will frequently give a theory or principle, then show how that principle or theory works in actual practice. He does not accomplish a great deal when he limits his discussion to the principle-theory alone. As an example, consider the theory of the alternating current. If you give a theory and do not make an analogy or an application to something which the reader already understands, then you will not get his complete understanding. When a classroom instructor gives his students an idea then demonstrates that idea, the students react favorably: they get what he means. But if he does not translate the generalities for practical purposes then his readers or students fail to understand him. In your technical manual you would do well to follow that principle.

In addition to these devices, you will make your writing easier to understand if you use introductory devices and summaries. In other words, tell your reader what you intend to cover; then, after covering it, tell him again what you have just discussed. There is a maxim which runs something like this: "Tell him what you are going to tell him, then tell him, then tell him what you told him." Think about that for a moment. It is a simple way of saying that you have to focus the reader's attention on points to be covered, present those points to him, then review what you have just covered. If you apply that approach to chapters and to subsections of a technical manual, you will

help your readers to understand the text of the manual.

In other words, the first paragraphs of a chapter will focus the reader's attention on the material he will read within the text of that chapter. In so presenting that material, you lead the reader by the hand toward a certain amount of information. When he has a preview of what he will read before he actually starts reading the detailed technical matter, he will understand it better.

Basically, the same idea holds true for terminal sections and summaries. After a reader has covered twenty or thirty pages of technical material, he may lose sight of the overall plan in his effort to understand individual details. A good summary will go over the highlights in a concise way and show the reader just what he has covered. There is nothing new about such an approach. Any good teacher will review what he covers at the end of each class session. If you have ever taught, you realize the importance of the review-summary.

The style of writing which you use in a technical manual will determine the effectiveness of that manual. It does not matter how nicely a product is printed; it does not matter how much you know about a subject; it does not matter even how well a publication is illustrated. If the style is not clear and forceful, then the end result will not be what a technical manual should be.

USE ILLUSTRATIONS AS VISUAL AIDS

While any technical manual must have a readable style, much of the information depends on illustrations. Look through any technical manual on your desk. Glance around you at the drawings and photographs which publications usually contain. You will see that these illustrations are training devices; they aid recognition; they help a man understand a schematic diagram; they show how pieces of equipment are operated. Very few of them are purely motivational.

Technical Writers should use in manuals the same approach that classroom instructors use in class: they should integrate illustrations so that readers will look at them when writers want them to, so that they will understand what the writer wants them to understand, and so they can actually visualize the equipment as the writer discusses it.

Suppose, for example, you were explaining how the various wires of a schematic diagram led from one part to several others. It would not be enough to say what you want to say, then suggest casually to the reader "as noted in illustration above." That does not tell him one useful thing. Instead of using that technique, be specific and definite. At the point of contact, tell him, "Now let's consider how (blank) wire leads from the transformer to (such-and-such a resistor)." The reader will follow your line of thinking, and he will understand the technique or the principle which you are explaining. In this way you can really teach him. But unless you guide him by the hand, it is unlikely that he will get from illustrations the information you expect them to portray.

At the Air Force Training Publications Squadron in St. Louis, Missouri, the writers follow a few specific guides in illustrating technical manuals. We will not attempt here to elaborate on those because of time and space. But briefly here are the rules which they apply in their writing:

1. Choose the passages to be illustrated as you go along;
2. Choose the best illustration to point out the guides of that portion of the text;
3. Integrate the illustration so that it becomes a valuable part of the text;
4. Give the illustration a specific name or caption so the reader will understand what the picture portrays;
5. Make sure that the labels and phrases on the illustration agree with the labels and illustrations and phrases used within the text.

If you follow those guides, you will make your illustrations really help the students. But if not, then the illustrations do not serve their real teaching function.

From this brief discussion you can see how a Technical Writer is really an instructor. When he presents his ideas clearly and simply, and when he makes illustrations become visual aids, then he is, in a sense, becoming a teacher.

(Continued on page 12)

PROFESSIONAL, ARTISAN, *SOMETHING ELSE* ?

Floyd Hickok

THE bubbling we are able to detect in the technical writing fountain emanates, I think, from the hope that individual writers have in attaining recognition as a professional. Group associations seem to spur on this hope, as though some magic in the name "professional society" would rub off onto the member as a result of paying his dues.

In order to examine the problem of professionalism among Technical Writers I propose to notice what it means to an individual to be a professional. To do this I propose four characteristics of a professional person:[1]

1. He possesses and is able to make use of or draw inferences from a body of specialized information.
2. He possesses and demands of other professionals the skills necessary for a high standard of performance.
3. Ethically, he has a high regard for the responsibility of the profession to the public.
4. He is concerned to see that professionally qualified persons are recruited into the field.

If the technical writer is a professional person is his body of specialized knowledge the field of technology about which he writes? From this field of knowledge is he able to or is he permitted to draw inferences and extrapolate conclusions? Or shall he be confined strictly to "picking another person's brains?" Unfortunately for most of those who hope to get "professional" recognition I fear that they are confined to picking. Even more often they are not expected to do any picking. On the other hand, when it becomes a question of interpreting science and engineering to other technologists, such as is done in handbooks, is it not true that the body of knowledge and the capacity to interpret are necessary?

On the matter of skill the Technical Writer should qualify without question. His only reason for being is that he is supposedly able to bring writing skills into an area where skill is needed but lacking. In this respect technical writing is artisan. Comparing the role of an unquestioned professional, such as a surgeon, it is technique – that is, artisan skill – which makes certain surgical operations possible. The skill function of the professional artisan is certainly a property of the Technical Writer.

It is doubtful that any human activity is more involved in ethical problems than the printed word. A man buys a book and all its contents at once become his property. He is privileged to do with it what he will. If the book is a report on cancer vaccine the man, because the book has become his property, is privileged to act in his own way according to the implications which the book has for him. In other words, what I am saying is that published words, after they have gone beyond the control of the writer-editor-publisher, belong to the public. Even a top secret document circulated to half a dozen people belongs to that segment of the public represented by the secret six. And a document of this type may influence the lives of more people more deeply than a generally circulated work. Hence, we can say that the person who originates a piece of writing ought to have a great sense of responsibility toward the words he puts down. This sense of responsibility ought to make him feel humble so that he loses that sense of great personal attachment to his brainchild, such as is characteristic of the amateur writer. The person who develops this kind of attitude toward technical writing is one who does technical writing as his role in life, professionally.

[1] These four characteristics of professionalism are paraphrased from a paper by Edward S. McKay, "How to Plan and Set Up Your Marketing Program." This paper was published in Marketing Series Number 91 by the American Management Association, Inc.

On the last count, that of wishing to reproduce their kind, the Technical Writer is a well-qualified professional. He is generally interested in producing more writers and better ones.

If we examine these four characteristics of the professional again we find only the first one in doubt – that of the right of the professional to use, judge or draw inference from a specialized body of knowledge. We can return to the first question. Shall that body of knowledge consist of a technology and science? Or shall it consist of that body of knowledge peculiar to the use of language and the publishing trades? If we answer in favor of the latter we have intrinsically committed ourselves to a non-professional future. The course of our group associations must be then toward either the guild or toward inspirational pep-societies. As I see it the only prospect for a professional future and the only reasonable assessment of the nature technical writers as they really are lies in admitting that the Technical Writer must use, professionally, the body of knowledge of a science as well as that of publishing. It does not seem possible to me that one can feel a responsibility toward the material which goes into the public communication matrix without these implications.

I could draw my conclusions at this point if it were not for the anomalous position of the Technical Editor in industry and laboratory. There would be no problem if editors here occupied the same position they do in the publishing world. In that area editorship comes to people who can write, or to people who can help others write and who have a great sense of responsibility. They have the responsibility to discover and guide authors, to safeguard the business manager from spending money on unwise publications, and to protect the reading public from fraud. An editor, wherever he is found, who can discharge these duties is a professional of the highest type.

In many spots where technical writing originates the editor does not make professional use of a body of specialized knowledge in order to bring responsibility to amateur writing. He is a service person to another type of professional person. I submit that a person who must play this role will find it difficult to make valid his claim to professionalism.

One reason this situation sometimes prevails is that persons who have not seen it done cannot conceive of how it is possible for some individual whose only relation to a scientific or technological problem is that of a writer can write competent technical literature. Yet there is an abundance of situations where this procedure is followed without ever realizing that it should be brought into question.

Another reason for the situation stems from the necessities of government (and private) purchase of research and development. The purchaser justly feels that he must have something to show for his money, and one of the tangible pieces of property are reports and handbooks. How much of this staggering increase in pure bulk of scientific literature, which frightens some, impresses others and drives others to invent elaborate schemes for documenting it, is due to the purchaser's need to have something to show for his money? In those times when the scientist did not publish until he was convinced beyond all doubt of the significance and correctness of discovery pure bulk never could develop into a problem. In these days, if editorship implied professional use of and responsibility toward a specialized body of knowledge the pure bulk problem could be brought under control.

One reason there is puzzlement about the difference between the Technical Editor and the Technical Writer is that often they are each doing exactly the same thing. Each one is charged with the duty of getting out technical publications. Their problems, their methods of work are basically the same; in particular applications these are as different as people.

My bets are on the emergence of technical writing as a professional activity in this technological society. For this probability judgment I offer two reasons:

1. Cultural matters are coming to play a great deal of importance in the attention of all of us. By cultural matters we must understand that we mean all of those affairs of the mind which relate people to people in a vast society. One of the most powerful bonds that relate mankind is the published word. Who is more likely to play a leading part in those communications which make a technological society possible than the technical writer?

2. We are participating, many of us, in the systematic examination of communication. Semantics, linguistics, information theory offer cores of study which may eventually make communication teachable. Information theory in particular seems to be a tool which may help to describe the mind in terms of communication and may even lead to a new kind of writing. It is just possible that out of these divergencies there may coelesce a specialized body of knowledge to which the Technical Writer will become the natural heir. This unique body of knowledge, at once a science and a working tool of communication, should remove all doubt as to whether the Technical Writer is a professional person.

Present day Technical Writers have such diverse backgrounds that there is much confusion about what the future of technical writing should be. I suspect that the reason why most of them consent to follow and become proud of their occupation is that they have in their make-up a little of the artist – which finds expression in the artisanship of writing and graphic arts. The scientist mistrusts the intrusion of these kinds of humanities into his field because he instinctively suspects that the mood creations of the artist are deleterious to the intellectual mind of the scientist. I suspect, however, that the long-term effect of the invasion of the artist into science will be for the good. But I do not foresee that this invasion will have any meaning if we are to concentrate our group efforts toward developing good editorial bedside manners or disseminating useful gimmicks. Some writers should use that capacity to understand values, which seems to be innate to the artist, in order to find inspiration in the broader implications and subtilities surrounding the position of the humanitarian in a technological society.

But if the Technical Writer is something of an artist at heart he still needs to think of himself as a professional. Technical writers need to be taught, and the field needs to have standards maintained. These are professional functions.

The Functions of a Technical Writer

However, these are just a few thoughts arising out of discussing my own experience with others and they[1] may inspire further discussion tonight. It will be noticed that I have made few "recommendations", but tried instead to list the various "alternatives" as they have shown themselves to me. This is because we probably all agree that the matters in question are still in a state of evolution, so that one can only generalize. I would, however, like to say that it is my firm belief that Industry can profit very much by the employment of skilled Technical Writers, particularly if it gives serious consideration to the organisational points I have tried to bring out.

In conclusion, I think I should make it clear that the views I have put forward in this review are purely personal, and not necessarily those of the company with which I am connected.

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[1]This paper was delivered to the London Presentation of Technical Information Group at University College, London, on March 24, 1955.

The Instructor Role

Don't forget that part of your job. You are not writing simply to record ideas and theories. Your writing, particularly in these times when technical data must go to readers who will operate complex equipment, has a vital role in making people technical experts. No technical manual is worth the paper it is printed on unless it helps its audience to understand the information which it contains. Beautifully bound and printed books are nice; but unless they instruct as they should then they are useless for the audience.

We have no time in the present world situation to present a conglomeration of words and of drawings which have to be interpreted.

Don't leave your reader guessing.

Teach him!

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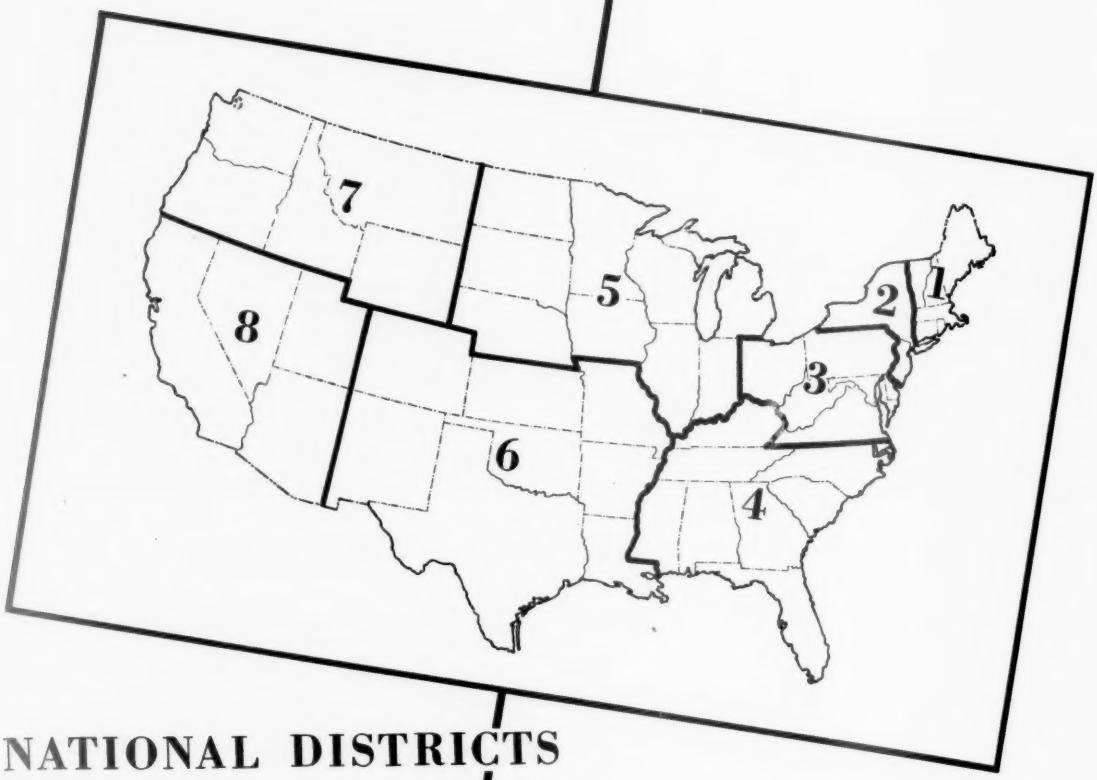

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